

# Personal Perspective

## Is the Diversity Issue a Non-Issue in Mainstream Academia?

By Lewis Asimeng-Boahene & Ana Maria Klein

### Introduction

Many educators today have been unpretentious about regarding mainstream thought as the supreme channel through which knowledge is disseminated. This may be the product of minds that appreciate the mainstream's intellectual contribution, positively or otherwise, to humanity. However, the growing cultural diversity of the United States makes it incumbent on educators to have a better understanding of the diverging values, customs, and traditions among all learners with different multicultural experiences as the minority thought or view may be just as equally legitimate and valid as the mainstream.

The melting pot metaphor, which used to be a prototype of the assimilation of immigrants into the United States, does not apply any longer because it does not in reality describe the country accurately. Rather than a melting pot, we actually have a *tossed salad* in which every segment maintains its own character, but adds a new spice to the whole, as immigrants to the United States do not lose their identity (Broman, 1982). However, because issues concerning diversity are delicate and complex, many educators adopt a hands-off approach to them. Diversity, however, pervades and persists no matter what the consequences are.

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Educators, therefore, need a better understanding of the different rich cultural tapestry of the nation that is increasing daily because schools have never offered any enthusiastic welcome to student differences (Perez, 1994; Manning & Baruth, 2000). This article examines why educators should be concerned with cultural diversity in the United States classrooms, spotlighting on demography, stereotyping, socio-economic class, different learning styles, and achievement/cognitive processes.

The problems and challenges that educators encounter daily, including lack of genuine educational and societal support, lack of teacher knowledge, parental disapproval, and lack of materials will also be addressed. The final look focuses on issues like responsive diversity/multicultural education programs and globalism in teacher education programs, drawing instances from the authors' own personal experiences.

### *The American Multicultural Heritage*

The United States has been diverse since its earliest times. Native Americans have unique cultures existing across the country. The colonizers that immigrated to the New World came from different parts of Europe. They too, for example, originated from diverse cultures, including the way and manner they communicated and also how they worshipped. Yet the struggle to offer all people equal rights, to establish and maintain a fair system of justice, to accord full access to economic opportunity, and to establish a climate of acceptance for diversity continues to evade this country and its schools (Hoge, 1996).

However, the people who immigrate to the U.S are increasingly reluctant to forsake their cultural traditions and values to become like mainstream society. For in-

stance, African Americans have fought or continue to fight to overcome oppression and discrimination so as to maintain their cultural heritage. Asians and Hispanics, also, are often not overly excited in trading their ethnic customs and traditions in favor of European American habits (Manning & Baruth, 2002). This need to recognize and respect individual differences and similarities within cultures further becomes clear when one considers the demographic changes in the country.

### *Demographic Statistics*

The need for a critical look at diversity in our classrooms is stronger today than it has ever been in the past. Currently, most students enrolled in today's teacher education programs are white and middle class, yet the preK-12 student population in many parts of the United States does not match that description. In spite of this, diversity issues in our schools are marginalized as the current traditional curriculum is based on the histories, experiences, and perspectives of the dominant group (Gallavan, 2000).

The changing demographics for students in public schools demand a revised approach to educational processes. We are told by familiar demographic statistics that approximately 33 percent of the American population growth during the 1980s was from immigration. This represented a 20 percent increase over the immigration rates that had existed since the 1940s. The 1990s have witnessed an increased influx of immigration from many countries. By the year 2000, demographers report that the United States is only 72 percent European American, almost 13 percent African American, and 11 percent persons of Hispanic origin. Asian Americans and Native Americans make up the remaining 4 percent.

At present, students of color are the

## Personal Perspective

majority in twenty-five of the nation's largest school systems. Demographic statistics estimate that by the year 2020 children of color will make up 46 percent of school-aged children (Pallas et. al cited in Hollis & Ralston, 2001) and thus by the year 2020 "White Americans will be the statistical minority in the United States" (Diouf, in Ball et al. 1998, p. 67). These present and future realities support the need for offering a strong program dealing with diversity issues as a part of the total school curriculum (Hodgkinson cited in Drake, 1993; Hoge, 1996; Gallavan, 2000; Brown & Kysilka, 2002).

For the purpose of this article, we would like to establish a working definition of diversity with respect to schools. When we speak about diversity in schools, we are referring to students of color, of varying religious traditions, national origins, national heritages, sexual orientation, socio-economic level, and lived experiences.

### Achievement and Cognitive Processes

A learner's cognitive style addresses the manner in which an individual derives meaning from the environment, and how that person interprets or processes information from that environment. According to Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural learning, cognitive development is of particular importance in diverse situations because learning can only take place if the situation mirrors the individual's cultural environment.

Because of this, teachers cannot assume that all learners process information in the same manner (Snowman & Biehler, 2000). Other scholars further argue that language and thinking strategies and skills relating to concepts and information depend on their overall cognitive development, which is rooted in their cultural background (Norton, cited in Manning & Baruth, 2000). Thus, the multicultural classroom instruction that does not take students' cognitive style into consideration is bound to fail.

### Socio-Economic Class

That different cultures prepare children to perform tasks in different ways is undisputable according to Bowman (1994). The social class differential that exists in the United States includes, among others, family's educational background and income. More often than not, a family's socio-economic status and income level determine the children's experiences, as do other factors such as conditions of the home, and

the presence of books and other reading materials that have a positive impact on educational progress.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural learning postulates that it is out of the question to consider the child in an environment separate from its culture. To Vygotsky, people create such psychological apparatus as speech, writing, and numbering as cultures develop. This theory, therefore, has a number of ramifications for diversity issues. One of those implications is that cultural differences may be mistaken for developmental deficiency, as is often the case with respect to the minority children in the public school systems (Snowman & Biehler, 2000).

### Learning Styles

For too many years, U.S. educators have choreographed the curriculum to cater to a select group like the white, middle-class, non-disabled, male student population, and expected other learners to conform. This policy disadvantages the minority children who form the majority in the public school system, thus creating a large number of educational losers. Schools are therefore challenged to take a more progressive approach and to recognize the multitude of differences among learners (Manning & Baruth, 2000).

An increasing body of research suggests that allying learning style with teaching and learning activities contributes to meeting each individual student's peculiar needs, as they are different as colors of the rainbow (Stewart, cited in Manning & Baruth, 2000). For example, it has been observed that the African-American learning style has been inspired by cultural customs transposed from specific communities in Africa. Both the African-American church and family have played a decisive role in fashioning the learning styles of African Americans (Anderson, 1998; Hale Benson, 1986).

Other research studies and personal experiences have shown that conflicts often arise when the African-American child is expected to perform in a fashion that is not in sync with the learning style (Sue & Sue, 1990; Anderson, 1998). When put in this circumstance or predicament, the African-American student sometimes undergoes cognitive dissonance; the trend is for the student to be mislabeled as incompetent, lazy, or unwilling to learn.

Progressive scholars like Villegas (1991) further argue that linguistic, social, and cultural deficit hold back minority chil-

dren from doing well academically. The cultural difference theories accentuate the strengths of different cultures and look for ways that instructional practice can acknowledge and build on those strengths. Thus, it is important for educators to know how all students learn, to recognize that students from culturally diverse backgrounds have unique learning styles, and to determine the most appropriate instructional approaches and techniques.

### Stereotyping

Stereotyping may be defined as "accepting an attribute as generally true of a group and then imposing it on an individual without questioning the assumption" (Brown & Kysilka, 2002, p. 56). For example, according to Elrich (1994), recent studies revealed that sixth graders in a school on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. held the following racial stereotypes:

- ◆ Blacks are poor and stay poor because they're dumber than whites and Asians
- ◆ Blacks people don't like to work hard
- ◆ Black men make women pregnant and leave
- ◆ Black boys expect to die young and unnaturally
- ◆ White people are smart and have money
- ◆ Asians don't like Blacks and Hispanics
- ◆ Hispanics are more like blacks than whites. They can't be white so they try to be black
- ◆ Hispanics are poor and don't try hard because, like blacks, they know it doesn't matter

Many such group stereotypes are derived from open or subtle messages preached by the media, including educational literature. For example, current educational literature reveals the preponderance of a troubling stereotype that predicts educational failure for African Americans and educational excellence for Asian Americans (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990).

Therefore, dealing with racial prejudice in the classroom should be a concern of every teacher in the classroom because of the fear, among others, of the danger of replacing ignorance with stereotypes as classrooms today are becoming more reflective of America's multiracial and multiethnic society. According to Hodgkinson (1986):

The schools of tomorrow may have to

be more sensitive to minority differences. Many blacks resent being lumped into a single racial grouping without regard for social and economic status. Similarly, Puerto Ricans do not necessarily enjoy being labeled with Cubans and Mexicans as Hispanics. It is clear that Asian immigrants from Japan, Korea, and Vietnam are very different. All of these groups and sub-groups want to retain as much of their culture as possible. (cited in Drake, 1993, p. 87)

Thus, addressing diversity in schools today presents a major challenge in our multicultural society, as educators must know how to be responsive to cultural differences and avoid stereotypes that mask commonalities shared by all cultural groups.

### Problems and Challenges

The challenges are numerous, but for the purpose of this article the following will be highlighted in the next section: (1) lack of genuine educational or societal support; (2) lack of teacher knowledge; (3) parental disapproval; and (4) lack of materials. Following this exploration, there is a section presenting details about legislation with regards to multicultural education, instructional strategies, and objectives. The need for developing a critical and social conscience is also addressed. One of the solutions explored presents the transformation of the teacher candidate, the curriculum and the entire learning community.

#### Lack of Genuine Educational or Societal Support

Legitimate societal support continues to be suspect when one talks about diversity in American schools. In a study on resources for multicultural education, one instructor reported that resources supporting multicultural instruction were some of the last to be funded at the school and were considered by teacher education colleagues only when the college was preparing for review for an institutional accreditation.

More often than not, teachers and administrators treat multicultural education via Banks' *contributions approach*, which communicates a totally inadequate understanding and application of multicultural education to preK-12 students, parents, teachers, administrators, pre-service teachers in the field, and the local community (Gallavan, cited in Schultz, 2002, p. 42).

#### Lack of Teacher Knowledge

Traditionally, the curriculum has emphasized the acquisition of mainstream thought, non-contentious abstract knowledge. School authorities have therefore exerted control over the curriculum content, which makes little provision for diversity issues.

Some teachers therefore, feel uncomfortable teaching about ethnic, cultural, or racial groups with their limited multicultural experience. Given teachers history up to date, even the most enthusiastic advocates for diversity among them may be experiencing anxiety about their ability to deliver (Hoge, 1996).

#### Parental Disapproval

Some parents who subscribe to a hegemonic view of European-American curriculum consider multicultural education as an affront to their vision of how America "ought to be." These individuals fear that Americans may be losing the melting pot culture that is supposed to unite the country. However, a close scrutiny of this perception reveals that the view-point overlooks the differences among the diverse European groups that colonized and later immigrated to the New World.

These parents also, instead of recognizing the challenges of the prevailing culture such as racism, poverty, violence, teenage pregnancy, and drug abuse that still face the nation, more often than not dwell on its charm and lay the problems squarely on the cultural, ethnic, and racial groups they seek to silence or diminish (Hoge, 1996, pp. 276-277).

#### Lack of Materials

Studies have shown that there is a lack of materials to draw upon and lack of time to prepare given the breadth of content when multicultural education and diverse issues in our schools are genuinely considered (Gaudelli, 2001). Furthermore, if teachers fail to inject the existence of a student's ethnic profile in the curriculum material, it negatively affects the self esteem of the learner as he/she gets the message that people in that ethnic group have made no contribution to the development of America (Boyer, cited in Drake, 1993).

#### Strategies for Improvement

The following section highlights teacher-educator strategies used to improve these instructional situations. The

views herein presented reflect recommendations from research, theory and anecdotal reports from teacher educators.

#### Legislation Mandating the Integration of a Multicultural Perspective in Schools

Teacher-education programs must eventually comply with the *Goals 2000* educational standards and the *No Child Left Behind Act*. This means that the integration of a multicultural perspective in teaching and learning is widespread throughout the United States. Accredited teacher-education programs must cover issues of diversity, multicultural awareness and sensitivity-training towards implementing tolerance and acceptance in the curriculum.

The buzz word heard on many campuses today is *equity*. This translates into raising the bar on expectations for all students and providing the same educational opportunities for all learners. An inclusive stance like this one makes an important and empowering statement in teacher education. It now implies that we can no longer turn away from our own diversity and we can not allow any learner's future to be at risk (Trueba, 1989).

#### Implementation Strategies

One teacher-educator describes her strategies for including diversity issues in her college course as follows. The format for her particular course is based on a required, field-based program. Third year teacher-candidates spend half a semester in a school classroom with a diverse student population. This richly diverse field experience allows teacher candidates to experience diversity first-hand and to modify their instructional goals and teaching objectives to serve the diverse learning needs of their future students.

A global and multicultural perspective should be reflected in the final instructional products created by these teacher candidates who have to develop instructional units that promote a world-view and also make room for diverse learners. Teacher candidates enrolled in this course learn to discriminate between biased instructional materials, to include a triangulated view on events and to allow for students to be actively engaged in their own learning.

Upon reviewing curricular instructional materials critically, teacher candidates use anti-bias guidelines to detect unsound practices in existing and future teaching curricula. Teacher educators adapt their teach-

## Personal Perspective

ing plans so as to promote equity for all learners. Hence, the strongly skills-based approach becomes obsolete, making room for action research, data-rich, invested learning. Encouraged to build on their students' strengths and interests, teacher candidates triangulate their teaching by (1) creating action research situations where data is gathered and analyzed by students (2) real documents and factual accounts are explored, and (3) shared discourse among peers is required.

This newly formatted classroom environment promotes equity and raises expectations for all students as the learning environment has an invested, meaningful tone and atmosphere. When expectations for all students are high, accountability and self-actualization practices take over. Dialogue amongst teacher-educators, learners, and school teachers identifies a need for extended time in the classroom. Students and teachers alike need to have more time to explore issues and to be invested in meaningful learning tasks.

### *Strategies to Introduce Diversity Issues in the College Classroom*

Teacher candidates are introduced to diversity issues in a theoretical format (Banks, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Ooka Pang, 2002). These theories allow students to explore the reasons for such an important topic of study. However, because they need to implement sound instructional practices, the semester does not allow instructors to dwell on theory as much. It is important to instill in teacher candidates the need for inspiring their future students and for developing their full potential. Instructional practice must focus on raising the bar and the expectations for all students, and offering them equal and productive learning opportunities (Nieto, 2000).

The college semester, which usually lasts for fifteen continuous weeks, does not allow teacher educators with much time to waste. A worthwhile strategy is one where a calendar of events is closely followed. Such a calendar includes a process of change whereby teacher candidates explore and experience their own transformation. It is important to begin with a sense of self. Teacher candidates need to humbly and sincerely explore their own views on diversity and their own reactions to discrimination and bigotry.

Once expunged, these feelings inform candidates about the feelings of anger and aggression which are learned behaviors acquired at an early age (Allport, 1958, Paley,

1998.) Gordon Allport, defined these feelings of aggression as early as 1958, when the Civil Rights movement was in its effervescence in the United States. He carefully analyzed human reactions towards difference, staging these in four distinctive phases of human behavior which reveal anger, bad-mouthing others, avoiding the issue of bigotry and finally physical and verbal abuse resulting in destruction. Vivian Paley (1998), exploring the feelings and reactions of students in early childhood programs also reveals how these hateful reactions are learned behaviors expressed towards others as early as age two.

### *Instructional Objectives*

The next stage is to focus on the needs of classroom students who are coping with their own thresholds of understanding along with the barrage of skills they need to acquire during their educational careers. It is of no use to add on global and multicultural experiences alone, devoid of content and structure (Banks, 2000; Nieto, 2000.) Hence the inclusion of a post-card perspective on the world does not suffice.

Teacher-educators and teacher candidates should become more knowledgeable about the world and its needs before they embark on teaching about cultural and linguistic diversity. With a quarter of the semester used up in developing a personal stance and in developing a theoretical framework, the next phase is to promote a transformation in the student. The last level of multicultural awareness promoted by James Banks (2000) is that of a cultural transformation. Translated into educational terms in the college environment, this means making a personal commitment towards change. How can this be promoted and addressed?

### *Implementing a Transformation Approach*

The first step is to explore all of the previous stages: (1) acculturation, (2) assimilation, (3) celebrations, and (4) transformation). Having students experience first-hand how wrong it is to promote acculturation, giving up of self to acquire the culture of others, assimilation, phasing into another culture, celebrating differences by promoting festivities and common themes.

A transformation requires change: taking a stance, celebrating our own social consciousness and awareness; putting our foot down in situations of non-equity and social justice should take up the other two thirds of the semester.

### *Developing a Social Conscience*

This is perhaps the hardest task of all. How can students protest, put their feet down, and be angry about injustice if they haven't experienced it? One powerful medium is media itself. Stirring up consciousness through shared screenings of scenes from the common lore. Teacher candidates express their opinions after reading about social action from the Malcolm Xs, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther Kings of yester-year and today. They share strategies and points of view, coming up with their own perspectives.

The final stage is that of the personal transformation. Multicultural education is presented to them as a process of triangulation where the truth is presented from three different protagonists. Students become excited when they learn that the truth cannot hold unless it is presented from three sides. Forcing students to view their teaching as a multiple-perspective adds depth to the preparation of the instructional format that will promote cultural and linguistic diversity.

What are some of these products? They are no longer post-card views of the world, instead, they present the progress, process, and stamina of a different people as if living through their skin. There is a paradigm shift in teaching topics about multicultural education (Ukpokodu, 1999). We are more interested in promoting a global perspective. Hence, talking about how the "melting-pot" or "tossed salad" in America is doing is no longer important.

It is far more important to explore where our immigrants, refugees, migrant workers, and settlers came from. Teacher candidates wishing to teach in elementary, middle schools, and high schools are now required to use real sources and to promote document-based questions in their future classrooms. The mandate we are hearing from research in curriculum and instruction is to promote the need for better and more equitable instructional resources.

We are also asking teacher candidates to explore, adopt, and understand (1) the anti-bias curriculum, (2) equitable educational teaching practices, and (3) caring, student-centered teaching approaches. Teaching programs for teacher candidates all over the United States now need to fulfill the cultural and linguistic diversity requirement to earn teaching credentials. So, as teacher educators, we have many questions, inhibitions, and inter-cultural clashes of our own.

Classrooms need to be tolerant and

equitable places of learning, where all learners are empowered to perform at their highest potential. We no longer accept just teaching about multiculturalism/globalism. We do not accept student projects that attempt to *import* diversity through topics such as "Christmas Around the World" or "Thanksgiving Celebrations Around the World." We are not satisfied with responses from classroom teachers stating that they, "Include a scene in the life of a Native American family during Thanksgiving" so that they can say they've included racial and ethnic diversity. *Piñatas, teepees, and menorahs* should not be considered classroom décor, to justify our world-view.

### Teaching Equitably

Teaching equitably and teaching about equity in all classrooms is perhaps a more important issue than celebrating *cultural congruence* (Banks, 2000). The area of cultural and linguistic awareness is opening new avenues for class-discussions in today's college classrooms. Bullying, harassment, and stalking come up as salient school-related topics of discussion. The newly-found issue of racial profiling surfaces as another important topic to deal with when talking about ourselves in post-911 North America.

Students in the college classroom should feel comfortable with their own self-awareness, as they explore their own biases. Self-disclosure should be a large part of the program of instruction, where ridding oneself of one's own personal biases prepares you as an equity-oriented teacher. Learning to share personal fears and anxieties with colleagues could take precedence over taking notes in the lecture hall, or responding to a multiple-choice test on cultural awareness. Pressing issues that affect young learners of today should take precedence over theoretical models of instruction.

The negative impact of the hidden curriculum, institutionally sanctioned discrimination in schools, and racism should be taught in the college lecture-hall. Teacher-candidates should be exposed to classroom realities in today's schools, where the self-fulfilling prophesies that wrongly track students into the "back of the room" and label them as failures early on continues to exist.

Exploration of the feeling of being "othered" and understanding what it feels like to stand out in a crowd, to lose face among peers, should be included in the curriculum. The issues that we discuss

within the multicultural paradigm (being different, isolated, silenced) surface as issues that we all face as members of a particular community.

Multicultural education in today's school classrooms calls for a change. James A. Banks calls this the *transformation approach* where everything that is taught and learned centers around a cultural exchange, or a give and take. Students and teachers negotiate between what it means to learn and what learning means to them. So, our job as teacher-educators is to level the ground, build the framework and empower teacher candidates to make way for this kind of learning. There are many attempts at doing just that. To cite a few, the entire second unit of the 2002/3 Annual Editions in Multicultural Education (McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2002) is devoted to teacher-educators' efforts in this arena.

Nancy Gallavan, for one, in her article "Multicultural Education at the Academy: Teacher Educators' Challenges, Conflicts, and Coping Skills" (pp. 39-45) describes the hostile reception and the indifference of students in the lecture hall. Her study surveyed the challenges experienced by 24 multicultural education instructors as they experienced the following from their students: (1) resistance, (2) opposition, (3) a need for quick-solutions so culturally-related problems disappear, (4) avoidance of the topic, and (5) lack of genuine concern. Instructors, on the other hand needed to bond with each other for support.

Overwhelmingly true in most of the instructors' responses was a need for moral support. The most important finding from this study unanimously spells out the need for appreciation. Teaching about multicultural/global issues is difficult. Teacher educators in general reflected on the need for collaboration, dialogue and problem-solving to strengthen the field. An enlightening note, however, and quite revitalizing one indeed, is the finding that taking social action (Ooka Pang, 2002) becoming closely involved with colleagues in the field will strengthen all of us.

### Conclusion

The diversity issue is in fact a non-issue in some academic environments where there is little diversity among student and academic populations. Many campuses are addressing this situation by increasing diversity, attracting under-represented minority students, and promoting multicultural awareness. These are healthy measures that will increase diversity in the long

run, and will result in positive changes.

However, today's teacher candidates need to know that there is a diverse world in their future classrooms. This issue should and must be addressed through instruction that informs teacher candidates about (1) current demographics, (2) legislation to protect under-represented groups, and (3) anti-bias instructional tools and practices. By addressing these issues seriously, the non-issue feature becomes a salient and important issue.

Teacher candidates should focus on developing critical awareness. Teacher educators must open the eyes of their students so that they are not consumers of instruction but actively engaged members of a global community. Teacher candidates should study the real issues that affect the world at large instead of developing a convenient post-card version of the world.

The critically aware teacher candidate should also be encouraged to take a stance in life and to make decisions that promote a social conscience. How often do teachers turn a blind eye to the unfairness of the educational system, to the gravity of an issue that occurred on the playground, or to the discrepancies of their instruction vis à vis the curriculum? As we empower our learners and raise the bar for our students to reach their potential through equitable learning processes, shouldn't teacher candidates be learning to model these desirable behaviors?

If teachers continue to feel disenfranchised by the system, if they live in fear and do not take social action because it may cause them their jobs, aren't we having them send a double message to their own students?

In conclusion, the above are some suggestions that can be implemented. Teacher educators need to (1) work from a sound conceptual framework, (2) base their actions on theory research, (3) act on issues instead of talking about them, and (4) model an empowered, socially and critically aware instructor.

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## Personal Perspective

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## FOR ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY

BY ANA MARIA KLEIN

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